Focusing on Faculty Reflection: How University Students Are Positioned in Service-Learning Courses

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning is often identified as a pedagogy to prepare undergraduates for life beyond college. However, research suggests service-learning courses rarely challenge learners to explore structural causes of inequity or engage in transformative action. This study explores how one college professor positioned students as they engaged in service-learning. Through document analysis of nine semesters of one course, researchers sought to understand how positioning of university students shapes the effectiveness of service-learning coursework with a justice orientation.

Keywords: critical consciousness, social justice, teacher education

Broadly, service-learning can be understood as "the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other" (Ehrlich, 1996, p. xi). Service-learning challenges learners to engage in inquiry into a problem and to apply "increasingly complex ideas and increasingly sophisticated skills to increasingly complicated problems" (Ehrlich, 1996, p. xii). It is common for U.S.-based colleges and universities to use service-learning as a means to address their mission statements, which often tout commitments to both service and community. Typically, this service manifests in the form of volunteerism, tutoring, building houses for Habitat for Humanity, or even longer-term study abroad and spring break trips.

Service-learning, however, has been met with harsh criticism as researchers question if the practice is aimed at or even capable of resulting in social change and justice (Rhoads, 1997). Instead, practitioners have looked to critical service-learning (CSL) to engage students in naming and changing social injustices and inequities (Rosenberger, 2000). Even more recently, Mitchell and Latta (2020) have argued that researchers and practitioners are poised to move away from mere definitions of CSL and "toward the exploration of a more evolved understanding of its enactment" (p. 4). Cognizant of the myriad critiques of service-learning and CSL, Mitchell and Latta offer equity-oriented critical reflection as a significant practice that educators must embrace as they endeavor to evolve understandings and manifestations of CSL and advance the goals of social justice. Ultimately, Mitchell and Latta urge the field to embrace futurity: "to orient ourselves toward the periphery of what remains just beyond our grasp of understanding—not to remain satisfied with what we have come to understand but to attempt to imagine what we have yet to imagine" (Mitchell & Latta, 2020, p. 4). In our attempts to "imagine what we have yet to imagine" we, three university-based teacher educators, engaged in a collaborative equity-focused critical analysis of the course materials associated with one CSL-oriented course.

Our analysis focuses on one credit-based, education-focused service-learning course, *Citizenship and Education*, a foundat-

ional requirement for the Civic Minor in Urban Youth and Communities at a large public university in the southeastern United States taught by Heather, a critical service-learning practitioner and co-author of this paper. Through the curriculum and activities, students were introduced to the challenges facing U.S. public schools. Students were encouraged to think about their own schooling experiences in light of new knowledge developed through service-learning partnerships with schools and community-based organizations that meet the needs of underserved student populations near the university. Through problem-posing and collaborating with students (6-12), teachers, community volunteers, and other stakeholders, university students participated in what Pollack (2013) identifies as "a complex programmatic approach to having universities engage with real-world issues of social inequality" (p. 230).

More specifically, this course was designed with a justice orientation at its core, which resonates with CSL, as theorized by Mitchell (2008). We assert that CSL has the potential to engage learners in (1) developing a deeper understanding of the causes of inequity and marginalization and (2) acting on this knowledge to make change. However, we contend that just creating a course with critical readings and reflections alone will not result in the intended outcomes of CSL. As educators dedicated to justice, we must strive to promote equity and student understanding of the relationships between power and oppression (Matteson & Boyd, 2017) by repositioning ourselves and our students as partners alongside community members.

In this paper, we heed the message of Mitchell and Latta (2020) and engage in a critical reflection of our own work as CSL educators. Although the goals of CSL are multifarious, we are interested in the ways that CSL positions students as active participants in service work. Specifically, we consider how course materials position students either as agentive co-participants in CSL work or as passive recipients of instructor knowledge. To develop a deeper understanding of how the positioning of university students might shape the effectiveness of CSL coursework with a justice orientation, we analyzed syllabi from *Citizenship and Education* over an eight-year period. Through document analysis, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do course documents used in a university service-learning class position students in relation to the community and the service-learning work?
2. How might these acts of positioning support and/or hinder the goals of critical service-learning?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Positioning theory, which frames our approach to the research questions, allows us to consider the ways that relationships form and shift over time and how individuals come to understand those relationships (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). At any given time, individuals position themselves and are positioned by others. These acts of positioning happen in relation to other individuals, spaces, activities, and memberships and can "open or constrict the range of possible ways of making sense of interaction and relationship" (Bullough & Draper, 2004, p. 408). In other words, the ways that we are positioned in relation to others and to work have implications for the understandings that we develop. Although its roots are in marketing (Krolokke, 2009), positioning theory has been taken up by educators as a tool to analyze how curricular materials may position students and teachers. For instance, Begoray et al. (2013) drew on positioning theory as they considered how educators might support students in developing critical media literacy. Similarly, Cun (2020) used positioning theory to better understand the ways that refugee children position themselves in schools in order to make curricular recommendations to teachers and administrators. In the study presented in this paper, we draw on positioning theory to consider the ways that students are positioned in relation to

service-learning and communities and how that positioning may shape the meanings they make and overall effectiveness of the course.

Vetter, Meacham, and Schieble (2013) extend the work of Davis and Harré (1999) to argue that "the act of positioning involves how rights and obligations are appropriated and refused during interactions" (p. 233). For Vetter, Meacham, and Schieble, then, acts of positioning can either validate or silence the voices, experiences, and contributions of others. This is noteworthy in the context of CSL work that endeavors to challenge power-laden and inequitable social practices that have effectively silenced the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. Next, we review literature on CSL within a justice-oriented pedagogical framework, before drawing on positioning theory to consider how the *Citizenship and Education* course may have served as an instance of CSL.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted above, service-learning has enjoyed some popularity among institutions of higher education for a variety of reasons. Some institutions are interested in increasing student engagement and awareness of inequities (Hughes et al, 2012; Weglarz & Seybert, 2004), while others foreground the development of civic responsibility (Vaknin & Bresciani, 2013). In a survey conducted with service-learning students, Weglarz and Seybert (2004) found that students perceived service-learning as improving their awareness of community needs, diversity, and how individuals impact their communities, as well as their empathy and skill at forming relationships. Hughes et al. (2012) describe service-learning as broadening student awareness of the impact of poverty on marginalized communities.

Service-learning is often concerned with fixing perceived problems in marginalized communities and promoting acts of charity and volunteerism (Mitchell, 2008). We differentiate these charity- and volunteer-based forms of service-learning (what we term "traditional" service-learning) from critical service-learning wherein faculty integrate a justice orientation to the service-learning work. Like traditional service-learning, CSL includes a recursive cycle of reflection and a connection between classroom and community engagement. However, CSL also attends to issues of inequitable power distribution, particularly in the relationship between universities and communities (Mitchell, 2008). Specifically, CSL should encourage students to examine institutions, determine how injustice is perpetuated in those institutions, and seek ways to dismantle those power structures (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). For Boyle-Baise (2002), students must have a "framework to question the 'rightness' of one's views" (p. 17) if they are to critically examine the power structures that surround them. Such frameworks help students understand differences between thinking, perception, and values between different groups. Boyle-Baise (2002) also contends that students need explicit instruction and awareness of the concepts of justice, inclusion, antiracism, and other aims of justice-oriented service-learning. Finally, Boyle-Baise (2002) advocates for the inclusion of community partners in every aspect of course planning, instruction, and assessment. From this perspective, CSL is positioned as a collaborative act of problem-solving that "embraces a dynamic network of problem-posers and problem-solvers" (Kinloch et al., 2015, p. 42). We view this relationship between the university and community as reciprocal—"where all learn from and teach one another" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 58). Thus, in seeking to dismantle societal inequities, CSL work itself must challenge power hierarchies between universities and the communities with whom they seek to partner.

Unearthing and dismantling societal inequities and injustices is particularly challenging as our dominant culture inculcates the working class with a way of thinking that maintains power structures (Shor, 1980). To

interrupt the maintenance of the status quo, individuals must develop critical consciousness, "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 35). Within the context of education, specifically, students must learn to "decenter that which is taken for granted and [to] reexamine it within a contextualized, power-aware framework" (Jacobs & Low, 2017, p. 234). The development of critical consciousness through coursework necessarily extends beyond the immediacy of a single course to become part of an ongoing continuum of learning and development. Although a necessary component of an effective CSL experience, existing institutional structures present challenges.

One challenge for CSL is the necessity of decentering university students when the tendency of institutions (through course materials and curricular goals) is to center their experiences and academic needs (Bortolin, 2011). Instead, CSL should evolve from the shared interests and goals of the university and the community. The academic structure of the university also presents challenges, specifically in regard to time. The semester schedule is not conducive to the development of ongoing, long-term relationships between university students and communities—contributing to short-term partnerships that may reify students' deficit perspectives of others and may actually thwart community goals (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Butin, 2003). These institutional limitations present challenges for faculty and community members as they develop service-learning experiences that move students toward critical, justice-oriented understandings of communities and others, rather than acts of charity and volunteerism.

Finally, our research rests on the belief that educators can engage in critical reflection in order to develop new perspectives (Atkins & Murphy, 1993; Brookfield, 2009). However, it is important to distinguish between reflection, which Brookfield (2009) views as making "a set of practices work more smoothly" and achieving "the consequences intended for them" (p. 293), and critical reflection that "calls into question the power relationships that allow, or promote, one set of practices considered to be technically effective" (p. 293). We consider the attention to positioning in this study to serve as a form of critical reflection as we attend to issues of power and privilege in the course documents. We now focus on Heather's work creating a CSL course aimed at developing students' critical consciousness and justice orientations.

METHOD

This qualitative study was designed and conducted by all three authors. Collectively, the authors have 54 years of experience teaching English Language Arts (ELA) and service-learning courses at the middle school and university levels. Meghan is an ELA teacher educator who has incorporated experiential learning activities (including service-learning and community-engaged work) into methods courses taught to both undergraduate- and graduate-level prospective teachers. Lucy is an English professor and ELA teacher educator who has included experiential learning activities in courses in high school, community college, and four-year universities. And Heather is an ELA teacher educator who uses service-learning as a tool for teacher preparation across disciplines and grade levels. All three authors self-identify as White middle class cisgender women; Meghan and Heather identify as heterosexual, and Lucy identifies as queer. With the exception of our identities as women, we mirror the demographics of the majority of university-based faculty across the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Our identifications are significant in light of the criticisms of traditional service-learning as promoting a "White savior" mentality when working with historically marginalized communities. As women representing privileged majority identifications, we

must regularly engage in reflexivity—critically reflecting on our work, our biases, and our pedagogical goals. We acknowledge that our knowledge is "partial" as Collins (1990) argued and that our positions are a part of a dialogue about shifting power dynamics in education and in communities. This study serves as one instance of this reflexivity as we critically analyze the documents used to develop and teach a university-based service-learning course.

Context

The data corpus for this study was collected from a service-learning course, which Heather has taught since 2012. The majority of students who enroll in the course over the years have been pre-service teaching majors/minors who plan to teach in high poverty rural and urban areas. More recently, as the minor has gained popularity, undergraduates majoring in business, engineering, and psychology have also enrolled. The curriculum focuses on a justice-oriented approach to teaching through assignments and discussions that challenge learners to think critically about the issues that affect members of the community and schools surrounding the university.

Over the past eight years, this course has been taught both on campus and in the community partner setting, which has included two middle schools. Though the readings and reflective journal assignments have changed over the years, the major assignments have been consistent with little revision. Each class has participated in the following assignments: Community Mapping; Social Justice Media Project; Legacy Project. Most recently, students met at an area middle school to support eighth grade learners with the Responsible Change Project (Coffey & Fulton, 2018), which is part of their regular curriculum. Additionally, the other community partners have included a district-wide reading program housed in a Title 1 elementary school near campus, a math and science tutoring program located in Section 8 housing in close proximity to the university, and a seasonal homeless shelter located in a church across the street from campus.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, we analyze how students are positioned across the documents used to teach the CSL course. Undergirding this research is an assumed connection between curriculum and student learning. The curricular materials analyzed in this study are grounded in a constructivist approach to learning and development, encouraging students' active engagement with course concepts and materials (Perkins, 2006). Per Barradell and Kennedy-Jones's (2015) integrative model of student learning, curriculum might offer students ways to interact meaningfully and make connections with concepts (p. 540); therefore, even though student learning and curriculum are integrated, reviewing curricular materials as a discrete component is worthwhile, especially as we are keeping those relationships between curriculum and student learning in mind.

As a form of critical reflection, we conducted a document analysis to consider how the positioning of university students shapes the effectiveness of CSL coursework with a social justice orientation (Bowen, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this study we are not interested in change over time. Instead, we consider the data corpus—documents used to teach the liberal studies course across nine semesters—to provide a holistic view of the course that allows us to inquire into the ways that this course addressed the objectives of CSL. Rather than analyzing materials from one iteration of the course, we believe that analysis of multiple iterations of the course allows for a more comprehensive perspective. Specifically, the data for this study were collected from spring 2013 to spring 2019 and included course syllabi, PowerPoint presentations, project assignments, project rubrics, and directions for individual activities. Data was compiled by Heather, with Meghan and Lucy conducting the bulk of data analysis. In

approaching the data, Meghan and Lucy followed Prior's (2008) approach to document analysis: analyzing both the "words, images, plans, ideas, patterns" (p. 824) in the documents, as well as how the documents were used to teach and facilitate learning.

Meghan and Lucy used thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify themes across the "words, images, plans, ideas, patterns" in the data by individually reading all documents associated with the spring 2013 iteration of the course and noting general impressions, patterns, and questions. Meghan and Lucy then met to discuss their takeaways as they aligned with the research question and to identify potential codes. Meghan and Lucy then returned to the data, this time analyzing the spring 2016 documents and applying the codes to the data. After achieving approximately 80% interrater reliability and another round of meeting and discussion, Meghan and Lucy finalized the codes and divided the remaining data between them to analyze. Meghan and Lucy coded the data assigned to them, remaining in regular contact throughout data analysis to discuss questions and ensure alignment in coding.

After coding all data, Meghan and Lucy looked for themes across the data, aligned with the research questions and conceptual frameworks. The following broad themes were identified: Positioning of the Community, Positioning of University Students, and Positioning of the Work. However, before finalizing themes, Meghan and Lucy met with Heather to gather more contextual information about how the various documents were used and developed in her teaching. Themes were refined to better address points of tension Meghan and Lucy identified across the data and the challenges experienced by Heather in developing the course:

1. Positioning of the Work: This theme was composed of two codes identifying those instances where the purpose of course- and service-learning work was aimed at developing students' critical consciousness of social issues and those instances where the work was primarily aimed at course completion.
2. Positioning of University Students in relation to Community: The two codes composing this theme included "insider," wherein students were positioned as community members and "outsider," where students were not positioned as community members. "Community" here refers to the communities where the service-learning work was completed.
3. Positioning of University Students in relation to the Work: The final theme was composed of codes wherein students were positioned as "explorers" through their service-learning and course work and as "change agents."

These three themes allow us to address our first research question: How do course documents used in a university service-learning class position students in relation to the community and the service-learning work? We then draw on these findings to consider our second research question (How might these acts of positioning support and/or hinder the goals of critical service-learning?) in the Discussion that follows.

FINDINGS

Findings are organized by the three acts of positioning identified across the data: (1) positioning of the work, (2) positioning of university students in relation to community, and (3) positioning of university students in relation to the work. We then draw on these findings to consider how these acts of positioning either supported or hindered the goals of critical service-learning.

Positioning of the Work

The two codes composing this first theme represent a tension in the purpose of the service-learning and course work: to develop students' critical consciousness or successful course completion. Our coding was guided by Freire (1970) and Jacobs' and Low's (2017)

conceptions of critical consciousness. Thus, we looked for activities and language that engaged students in naming societal inequities and then acting to change them.

Across the data, the code for developing students' critical consciousness was applied 63 times. The fall 2017 iteration of the Legacy Project is one course artifact wherein this code was applied. This project facilitated students' development of critical consciousness by requiring them to (1) communicate with a community partner to determine an issue or problem that they would like to have addressed; (2) conduct research to provide additional context to the community-identified issue or problem; (3) develop a project that addresses the issue or problem; (4) enact the project; and (5) reflect on their experience and the effectiveness of the project. By working alongside a community partner to name an inequity and develop a project to address that inequity, students were positioned to develop critical consciousness. Further, as part of the reflection component of the Legacy Project, students were asked, "How will future students in this course be able to continue your project?" This question, like the Legacy Project in general, challenges students to think beyond the single semester and to connect their experiences and knowledge to ongoing service-learning work and cohorts of students. Further, this question aligns with the goals of CSL as the community-based work is positioned as an ongoing, problem-solving instrument (Kinloch et al., 2015). Similarly, CSL work is aimed at naming and dismantling systemic inequities in society (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002)—inequities that are deeply ingrained in the ways we understand and move through the world. These are not inequities that can be addressed through short, semester-long projects, but that require ongoing attention, action, and critical reflection. Questions like the one posed above and projects like the Legacy Project encourage students to develop critical consciousness that extends beyond their immediate experiences and timelines.

The Student Service Contract implemented in the Fall 2017 iteration of the course also encouraged students to view the purpose of the course as developing their critical consciousness. By signing the contract, students acknowledged their role "as a partner in this service-learning project" as they "contribute to the needs of the community." Although the language of "needs" could potentially position the community in a deficit light (which we review later in this paper), we view this early attention to social issues and community partnership as attaching attention to the development of critical consciousness to the service work. Further, asking students to review and sign the contract early in the semester conceivably framed the entire course around the goals of critical consciousness development. Finally, the contract specifically named the following as a goal of the course and community partnership: "to develop their critical thinking skills, commitment to values, and skills for effective citizenship." All three pedagogical goals represent skills and tools that students can (and should) take with them, hone, and apply beyond the confines of a single course, semester, or project. Attention to "effective citizenship" also positioned the service-learning work in a dynamic network of activity (Kinloch et al., 2015), rather than reinforcing a unidirectional relationship between the students and the community members.

Unlike those course documents aimed at developing critical consciousness, documents focused on course completion remain attuned to the immediate concerns of a single course and are bounded by a semester schedule and do not attend to the continuum of individual student development. Activities and language that emphasized directions for completing tasks (e.g., how and when to submit work, division of tasks, etc.) were coded as course completion, which was applied only 33 times across the data.

Statements coded as "course completion" were typically found in assignment directions and grading rubrics. For instance, the Community Mapping Project,

which was a common project across multiple iterations of the course, asked students to use physical and digital tools to identify community resources. Although the project was framed by a critical question—"How does location influence the experience of students in schools?"—instructions for the project, as well as the grading rubric were largely focused on course completion goals. The rubric, for instance, included six criteria: Self-Evaluation, Peer Evaluation, Mapping, Community Assets and Resources, Multimedia Presentation, and Other Required Components. The rubric was coded seven times, with five codes attributed to "course completion" goals (rather than the development of critical consciousness). The highest score (9-10 points) for Community Assets and Resources, for instance, could be earned as long as the "Map contains twenty or more community resources correctly labeled and easily seen." Other criteria included requirements for correct spelling and grammar and the development of a polished and well-organized presentation. Thus, although the project purported to engage students in developing critical consciousness about the relationship between schools and students, the specific directions and grading criteria were primarily focused on course completion goals.

We view the significantly higher number of critical consciousness codes as suggestive of a strong critical aspect of this course. The overarching directions and purposes attached to various assignments and activities were certainly aimed at supporting students in identifying systems of oppression and viewing themselves and their work as situated within larger networks of problem-solvers. However, we do not see this attention to critical consciousness consistently woven throughout the specific directions and grading criteria used to structure the various course assignments, thus limiting the potential for this course to serve as an instance of CSL. We now turn to students' positioning in relation to the community as we continue to inquire into the potential for this course to function as CSL.

Positioning of University Students in Relation to Community

Across the course documents, students were positioned as either insiders or outsiders to the community. We consider insiders to be members of the community where the service-learning work occurred, to share spaces and resources with community members, and to be familiar with the spaces, people, and issues that compose the community. Conversely, being positioned as an outsider signifies that students were not considered members of the community and lacked familiarity with physical and intangible elements of the community.

The insider code was applied three times across the data. For instance, one in-class activity prompted students to consider the following: Over the past six months, at least, you have lived in the University community. What do you KNOW about this community? Without looking anything up on your computer or phone, name some landmarks that have become a part of your daily life.

This prompt positioned students as knowledgeable members of the university community, who would be able to identify aspects of the community without needing to do additional research. Although this statement clearly positioned students as university-community insiders, the service-learning work in this course was completed off the university campus at schools and other community-based organizations. This code is also a bit misleading because all three instances of the code were applied to the same directions for the same activity that took place across three different semesters. Thus, across all nine semesters of data, only one activity positioned students as insiders to the community.

Course documents positioned students as outsiders far more frequently, with 43 codes attributed. Each of the nine syllabi included the following statement in the course description: "We will venture out into the community to learn firsthand about teaching and learning and what factors influence

education in the region." As the first portion of the syllabus to specifically address the content and purposes of the course, this statement effectively positioned students as outsiders—conceivably providing a lens through which to approach the rest of the syllabus and the course as a whole. Similarly, in the fall 2017 iteration of the course, students completed a Legacy Project at the conclusion of their service-learning work. The following was included in the project overview: "In preparation for leaving your legacy with the community agency, you must show evidence of communication with the community partner/representative," positioning students as outsiders to a community that they have temporarily visited and will inevitably leave. The statement does include elements of critical consciousness development in that students were encouraged to consider the potential lasting impact of their work; however, the focus on the *students'* impact ("your legacy") further divides the students from the community members. In a sense, this statement and project could be viewed as validating the work of the university students, while silencing that of the community partners.

We consider the "insider versus outsider" dichotomy to be particularly nettlesome. What *is* clear across the data is a propensity to position students as outsiders to the community. What is less clear is the impact of this positioning when considering the critical aspects of the course. First, we find it interesting that students were assumed to be outsiders to the community, given that the average student at this university is a resident of the local area and that many students continue to live at home and commute to campus, rather than living in the dorms. It's conceivable, then, that these students are familiar with various communities within our larger city and even some of the school districts and schools where the service-learning work was situated. It is noteworthy, too, that apart from the early prompt to consider their knowledge of the University-community, no other activities across the nine semesters prompted students to reflect on their own community-based experiences, memberships, or knowledge.

We do not view the positioning of students as outsiders to be problematic in and of itself. Instead, we question how this regular positioning shapes the experiences and perceptions of students as they engage with the community through their service-learning work. For instance, does such positioning encourage students to take an asset- or deficit-oriented approach to the other? Do the students view themselves as saviors to or partners with the community? In other words, does the consistent positioning as "outsider" contribute to or hinder the potential of achieving critical goals in service-learning? We now turn to our final theme to provide further insight into these questions.

Positioning of University Students in Relation to the Work

The final category brings together elements of the first two to consider how students were positioned in relation to the community and the service-learning work. Across the data, we identified two complementary acts of positioning: student-as-explorer and student-as-change agent. Statements coded as "explorer" included those where students were encouraged to learn about the community, to gain awareness about available resources and interactions between community members, and to leave the university campus to go into and/or spend time in community spaces. Students were positioned as community explorers approx.-imately 54 times across the data. Far less common were instances where students were positioned as change agents, with only 16 codes so attributed. The change agent position represents an extension of the explorer role to include action for change and include tasks or prompts that encouraged students to consider how they might act on knowledge gained about the community.

Generally, students were positioned as explorers in more overarching ways. For

instance, entire activities like the Community Mapping Activity, positioned students as explorers by requiring them to "venture into" the community and identify various resources there. Similarly, the Instructional Method portion of the syllabus indicated that "university students will engage in community-based field trips and interact with educational professionals and community members." The language of "field trips" culls up grade school memories of unique and much-anticipated school days where we packed a lunch, piled onto a school bus, and rode with our friends out to a new or unfamiliar place. Together, the imagery of the field trip and the purposes and format of the Community Mapping Activity suggest a physical chasm that students must traverse to explore and learn more about communities.

Although less frequent, students were also positioned as change agents at various points in the course documents. These acts of positioning occurred both in the overarching purposes for assignments and in the specific questions posed during in-class discussions and reflection activities. For instance, in the spring 2019 course iteration, students were able to choose the format of their final projects, which prompted a critical analysis and reflection of the service-learning work. One option, the Letter to a Government Representative, asked students to reflect on their experiences at the service-learning site in order to:

> Make a case for action on a social justice issue of concern to you. You should cite research in your paper to support your position and provide an actionable solution that can either be accomplished on a local, regional, statewide, or national scale (H. Coffey, personal communication, June 15, 2020).

Not only did this task encourage students to think about potential changes based on the community knowledge they gained while exploring, it also engaged students in action by having them write to policy makers who could, conceivably, make change. This act of positioning effectively validated the experiences of the students and encouraged them to amplify their voices through writing.

In-class discussions were also ripe spaces for students to consider how they might act based on their community knowledge. Toward the end of the spring 2013 semester, following the service-learning work, students engaged in a Socratic discussion on the following questions:

1. How can we change the public's perspective on Title I schools and the students who attend?
2. As a teacher, what can we do to stop discrimination in classrooms?
3. How can we motivate others to have hope and to believe in themselves?
4. How can we better educate students on their own cultural identity and others'?

All four questions encouraged students to think critically about their service-based experiences in schools, particularly Title I schools, and then consider how they might act for change. We view these questions as engendering a critical approach to service-learning, as students were prompted to consider systemic inequities and to position themselves within networks of individuals acting for change (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Kinloch et al., 2015). We now turn to a discussion of all three themes as we consider our second research question.

DISCUSSION

Our second research question inquires into how the various acts of positioning presented in the Findings supported and/or hindered the goals of CSL. We are particularly attuned to the ways that students were positioned in relation to the community and the work. Based on our findings, we offer four ways that students may be positioned in service-learning work: (1) outsider-explorer,

(2) outsider-change agent, (3), insider-explorer, or (4) insider-change agent. As indicated previously, the insider/outsider dichotomy is particularly knotty in service-learning contexts and, when paired with other acts of positioning, can contribute to the development of critical consciousness and justice- and equity-oriented CSL. For that reason, we begin by discussing the insider-outsider dichotomy before reviewing each positioning combination in greater detail to offer implications.

Insider-Outsider

There are benefits to being positioned as an outsider and/or recognizing one's position as an outsider in service-learning experiences. As a form of inquiry-based pedagogy, we see points of similarity between service-learning and qualitative research—particularly in the ways that qualitative researchers position themselves in relation to phenomena, research questions, and research participants. We look to Wolcott (1990) who writes: "I do not go about trying to discover a ready-made world; rather, I seek to understand a social world we are continuously in the process of constructing" (p. 147). If, as Wolcott contends, there is no "ready-made world" to discover, and instead individuals are always actively constructing the world, then insider-outsider community memberships are constantly shifting, with neither being consistently superior to the other. Further, an outsider positioning may allow for different perspectives of a particular community, group, or set of behaviors (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006). On the other hand, a community insider has valuable contextual information about communities, groups, and behaviors that may support the development of critical consciousness (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006). Thus, it's inevitable and essential that individuals shift between insider and outsider positionings as they make sense of the world around them, familiar or not.

To clarify, our intention is not to devalue the insider-outsider dichotomy or suggest that it doesn't matter. Significant research on the positioning of others tells us just the opposite. Kendi's (2016) work reminds us that positioning in and of itself is not quite as significant as the behaviors and biases that evolve from those acts of positioning. For instance, human behavior demonstrates that outsiders tend to ascribe characteristics to whole groups of others, particularly negative characteristics. Conversely, when encountering a fellow insider behaving in a negative way, the tendency is to consider that person anomalous to the group. It's not difficult to see how even small interactions with or observations of "others" can contribute to stereotyping and oppressive practices. Thus, our insider- or outsider-ness matters, particularly when interacting with less familiar groups (like in service-learning contexts), and demands that we avoid "the trap of the cultural safari" (Forbes et al., 1999, p. 167) by developing critical consciousness about ourselves and society. The knotty relationship between insider and outsider positioning frames our understanding of the student positioning combinations.

Student Positioning Combinations

Across the data, students were positioned primarily as outsiders and explorers in relation to the community and service-learning work. This pattern caused us pause as we considered how different acts of positioning might shape students' learning and development of critical consciousness. We identified four combinations of student positioning: outsider-explorers, outsider-change agents, insider-explorers, and insider-change agents.

Positioning students as *outsider-explorers* may contribute to deficit perspectives of community members, particularly if students are not prompted to engage in regular self-reflections of their own experiences, biases, and community memberships. One of the pitfalls of service-learning implementation is the pervasive nature of colonialist mindsets, so this positioning can represent a particular problem for CSL. However,

positioning students as outsider-explorers could also challenge charity approaches to service-learning, thus moving toward the development of critical consciousness. Time is a significant factor. In our study, students participated in a semester-long service-learning activity, which, as discussed previously, presents challenges for student learning and community partners. Unfortunately, the current structure of most universities hinders the establishment of long-term service projects. When limited by time, it is particularly important to challenge charity approaches to service-learning; positioning students as outsider-explorers who are primarily focused on gaining a deeper, more critical awareness of communities could be an effective means of avoiding such pitfalls.

The *outsider-change agent* position could support students in developing critical consciousness and achieving the goals of CSL, due to the focus on change and action. However, as alluded to previously, this positioning could also result in charity and colonization where students attempt to make changes based on limited personal knowledge gathered from their other community memberships. CSL emphasizes reciprocity and challenging power hierarchies (Mitchell, 2008). It follows, then, that the most effective community change would come from within—from the members of that community potentially working in tandem with student-outsiders. Thus, the change agent is not merely the service-learning student, but also includes the community members.

Similarly, the *insider-explorer* position could contribute to the development of critical consciousness as students apply an "explorer" lens to a community that is familiar to them. In this way, the student brings their own deep contextual knowledge to the community, but is encouraged to see the community as an "outsider" might, or to explore areas of the community that are new or unfamiliar. The downfall here is that students aren't encouraged to take the next step and act for change. It can also be challenging for insiders to apply a critical lens to something that is familiar—requiring an educator to provide regular opportunities for critical reflection.

Finally, the *insider-change agent* position assumes that community insiders have deeper, more critical knowledge of their communities' needs, strengths, histories, goals, relationships, and discourses. These insiders, then, are powerfully positioned to act for change from within the community. However, as an extension of the insider-explorer positioning, it can be challenging for insiders to critically analyze familiar phenomena to envision change. Thus, it seems that a combination of these different positionings is necessary if service-learning is to be critical and aimed at developing students' critical consciousness.

We do not draw from our findings to suggest that one positioning or even positioning combination—insider, outsider, explorer, or change agent—is superior to another. Instead, we advocate for critical, inquiry-based approaches to service-learning where students, educators, and community-partners together identify, embrace, and work to understand moments of tension.

Embracing Tension

Our findings were organized by tensions in positioning. The messiness of the ways in which students are positioned while doing CSL is a reminder that awareness and acceptance of such incoherency is one tool for resisting hegemonic systems like White supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity. Smith (2012) argues that struggle is an act of "activist scholars and organic intellectuals who work in that intersection between the community and academy" (p. 200); rather than normalizing Whiteness or middle-class values, educators can engage in critical reflection to consider the complicated ways in which we, our students, and our community partners approach partnership work and one another. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) apply an under-

standing of this messiness to teaching itself, writing that "Ambiguities, uncertainties, and unpredictability are the substance of teaching" (p. 74). Thus, incoherence is not something teachers must resolve; instead, existing in the multiplicity of meaning is the actual work of teaching. Fecho (2011) characterizes this idea of messiness and incoherence as wobble and argues that living in and exploring moments of tension in the classroom is more productive than reasserting order. We draw from our findings and these conceptual understandings of tension to consider how educators may better design and facilitate CSL opportunities that foreground the development of critical consciousness.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As in any qualitative study, we are hesitant to offer generalizable conclusions based on our work. Instead, we acknowledge the limitations of this study and draw from our own critical reflections to offer implications for researchers and educators. Perhaps the most obvious limitation of our study is the lack of student response. Because our primary focus in this research was on the curricular materials themselves, we did not also engage students as participants in the study. A logical and important next step in this research is to invite current and past students to reflect on their experiences in the CSL course and to discuss their current understandings of concepts like service, community collaborations, and activism.

We also offer implications to educators as they engage students in *contextualized* CSL. In order for the work to be critical, dynamic reflection around positioning is crucial for CSL faculty. We draw from Mitchell and Latta (2020) to offer the following overarching questions to CSL educators:

> • How might our courses and materials reflect the just future we imagine for ourselves, our students, and our community partners?
> • How would our course materials be written if all relationships (between faculty and students, between students and community partners, between community partners and faculty) were authentic and equal?
> • When power is redistributed, what will the world look like? How can our course materials speak that future into being, instead of responding only to the present (unjust) moment? (p. 4).

Extending from their responses to the previous questions, we recommend that faculty consider the following as they develop the specific tasks and expectations of their courses:

> • Who are my students? What community memberships do they bring with them to this course? What are their funds of knowledge? (Moll et al., 1992).
> • How will student familiarity with the community be built? And/or how will student familiarity with the community be leveraged to support their work in that community?
> • How are students positioned in relation to community members? In relation to the service-learning work? How can I shift these positions periodically throughout the term?
> • What role do community members play in the development and facilitation of the service-learning work?
> • In what ways are students engaged in critical self-reflections of their experiences, observations, and meaning-making?

Facilitating sustained and critical discussions of these questions and regularly reflecting throughout and following completion of service-learning courses may support faculty in developing CSL experiences that encourage students to challenge inequities and power structures in society writ large.

Furthermore, critical reflection is important for modeling "the action reflection dynamic central to its pedagogy in ways that prioritize equity and justice" (Mitchell & Latta, 2020, p. 4). Faculty might invite students to participate in conversations around positioning in relation to one another, the work, and the community as they navigate tension experienced during service-learning. First, both students and faculty need to engage in regular self-reflection aimed at unearthing their own positions and experiences, as well as the ways they position others in response. Although it may be uncomfortable (and we appreciate Heather's willingness to make herself and her course vulnerable in this study), faculty need to critically analyze the documents associated with any service-learning or community-engaged coursework. As we have done in this study, faculty should consider the ways that language is used to position students and communities in ways that may either validate or silence their voices, experiences, and knowledge. Similarly, faculty should consider how the overarching purposes of their course (via the course syllabus) and major assignments align (or do not) with the specific directions and grading rubrics used by students. Is the mission of the course actualized through the course assignments? Through the language used to describe students and community partners?

Students also need opportunities to critically reflect on the meanings they make through service-learning work, including moments of tension or discomfort, questions, and new understandings. Students should be prompted to reflect on their positioning as insider/outsider and explorer/change agent and to shift between these different positionings. For instance, students might reflect on the following:

- What communities are you a member of? Why do you consider yourself to be a member of those communities? How do you interact with other members of those communities?
- What similarities and differences do you see between your own community memberships and the communities you're interacting with through service-learning?
- What are points of pride that you have in your own communities? What resources, actions, or traditions are significant and positive? What are points of pride identified by the community members in your service-learning site?
- What are challenges or issues you would like to address in your own community? What are challenges or issues community members in your service-learning site would like to see addressed?
- Who is best positioned to address those challenges? Why?

Reflecting on these questions may support students as they become critically conscious of their positioning in relation to the service-learning work and various community spaces. Finally, regularly engaging students with these questions provides a model for the types of critical, community-engaged work we want to see at the K-12 level. The majority of students enrolled in the service-learning course in this study were pre-service teachers. By critically reflecting on their own positionings in the CSL course, these pre-service teachers may be better prepared to center the experiences of students and communities when designing curriculum and assessments for their own classrooms.

Course materials, like syllabi, assignments, and other course documents, often retain the vestiges of more traditional, hierarchical pedagogies, so it is only through self-analysis like the one modeled systemically here that course materials aligned with equity and justice will become a mainstay of CSL courses. It is time for us to imagine new structures, new syllabi, new assignments, and new language that align with the future we imagine.

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